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ABSTRACT

Because testing and the use of test results are controversial subjects, parents and advocates must exercise considerable care when working to assure that tests are appropriately used in public elementary and secondary schools. One should guard against making assumptions which may have been created by widely publicized reports about test abuse. Prior to discussing test use with educators, parents and advocates should be clear about the specific nature of their concerns, as knowledgeable as possible about testing, and have outlined the specific information they want from the educators. Considerations should include: (1) tests should be used to help children: (2) educators should be able to clearly explain the meaning of test results: and (3) tests and test results should not be considered to be the exclusive property of the school or school district. Each year, parents and advocates need to systematically determine who required the test to be given and how the test results will be used in order to determine whether the tests are truly being used to benefit the children. (Author/RL)

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PARENTS'/ADVOCATES' STRATEGIES TO ASSURE THE APPROPRIATE USE OF TESTS IN PUBLIC ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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December, 1980

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TM 800 774

The use of tests in public elementary and secondary schools to assess the educational achievement of students is an accepted pedagogical practice. Test results may be used for a variety of purposes from informing students and their parents of the degree to which students have mastered facts, skills, and insights; to "diagnosing" student learning problems; to making decisions about how students can be most effectively (or conveniently) grouped for instruction. In spite of assertions by some educators that test results are of great value in the educational process, test results are sometimes not used at all. Rather, the results of tests may be collected but never analyzed or used for any meaningful purpose. Test results can also be used in such a way that students are harmed rather than helped. A student's poor performance on a test may be taken as an absolute indication of the student's superior or low level of achievement, or lack of ability. Test results may also be used inappropriately if students are labeled or grouped for instruction in ways that do not significantly contribute to increasing their educational achievement.

Because testing and the use of test results are controversial subjects, parents and advocates must exercise considerable care when working to assure that tests are appropriately used. While it is useful and necessary to approach testing with an attitude of healthy skepticism, one should guard against making assumptions which may have been created by widely publicized reports about test abuse. If parents and advocates approach school officials with an assumption that tests are being misused or that tests are deliberately used for the purpose of harming children, it is likely efforts to assure appropriate test use will be off to a bad start. Prior to discussing test

use with educators, parents and advocates should be clear about the specific nature of their concerns, they should be as knowledgeable as possible about testing[1], and they should have outlined the specific information they want from the educators. A discussion with educators on the subject of testing may be facilitated by parents' and advocates' consideration of the following:

1) Tests should be used to help children. If tests are used to assess students' educational achievement, to assess educational programs, to assign students, or to make other decisions affecting childrens' educational welfare and future, educators should be asked to explain how the tests will benefit the education of the students. Parents and advocates should go into meetings with educators prepared to focus on the essential question, "How is this test being used to help my child?" It may be necessary to ask that question not once but many times in order to get a straight answer.

2) Educators should be able to clearly explain the meaning of test results. Even though tests and test results are often complex, it is reasonable to expect that educators should understand test results and how to interpret them to others. However, this may not be the case. If educators cannot explain test results to parents and advocates, then it may indicate the educators lack the knowledge and understanding necessary to assure the effective use of tests.

3) Tests and test results should not be considered to be the exclusive property of the school or school district. Because the use or misuse of tests is so important, it is necessary for parents and advocates to have the opportunity to study and understand test results. Also, it may be necessary for them to seek assistance from other persons to analyze test results. For this reason it is important for parents and advocates to obtain a copy of test results for their use. This may be a problem because of privacy rights or school officials' concerns regarding test security, but parents should make every effort to obtain a copy of their children's test results.

By keeping these points in mind, parents and advocates may be able to have more fruitful discussions with educators about the use of tests.

The first question of parents and advocates should be to determine (1) who, or what group, required the test to be given, and (2) how the test results will be used. Concerning the question of who mandated the test, it is important to know whether it was the state legislature, the state board or state department of education, the local school board or school superintendent, a building principal or classroom teacher. This information is significant because of the implications for test use. If the legislature has required the administration of a test that local educators do not agree with, or which they regard as undue interference in the routine of the classroom, the test may not be administered well, or its results may not be used. There have even been cases where local educators made deliberate efforts to influence the results of a test mandated at the state level. On the other hand, when

a classroom teacher develops and administers a test to the students he/she teaches, the test may escape any scrutiny by the teacher's supervisors. The test may not be well designed, and may be an inappropriate means for assessing students' skills or knowledge. Who mandates testing and subsequent decisions - or the lack of them - concerning how tests are developed and the type and extent of technical assistance given to those administering the test, can significantly influence whether tests are appropriately used.

As we have already suggested, it is also important to know how the results of tests will be used. Parents and advocates must decide for themselves whether the reasons given for test use are satisfactory. The use of teacher made tests in the classroom to assess students' knowledge of subject matter is so common that parents and advocates may feel it is hardly worth the effort to question test results used to grade students. But there may be stronger concerns about whether the results of students' performance on a single standardized, norm-referenced test should be used to group all students in a school for the purpose of instruction. Even more serious questions may be raised if test results are used to classify a heretofore "regular" student as educable mentally handicapped.

Parents and advocates should also be aware that publishers of standardized tests make some efforts to ensure that their tests are properly administered. Most test publishers provide educators with a manual which not only explains the purpose of the test and provides instructions for its administration, but also provides guidance concerning the use of test results. However, many educators are busy people; they may also be weary, and they are certainly human. This means they may not give the attention to

studying the test manual or handbook that the test publishers intended. As a result, tests may be misused because educators improperly administer or use the test. They may mistakenly ascribe to the tests some powers which do not exist. In order to learn more about a particular test, parents and advocates should ask to have an opportunity to study the test manual.

School systems sometimes try to improve educators' testing skills by providing staff development programs (in-service training) which focus on tests. The quality of these experiences is likely to vary widely, but it is important that school systems make the effort to help educators at the school building level carry out their responsibilities for assessment. It is appropriate, therefore, for parents and advocates to inquire about whether staff development experiences in testing have been provided and, if so, to ask about when the programs were held, what subjects were covered, and what were the objectives of the program.

Parents may find it helpful to systematically inquire each school year about tests which their children will take, and how the results of those tests will be used. This may provide some baseline data which will enable individual parents to be better informed about testing of their children. Once that information is known, the processes of vigilence and inquiry must be constantly used to determine whether the tests are being used to benefit the children.

Regardless of how test results are used, parents and advocates will probably find that educators rely heavily on test results to make a variety of decisions about students. In some cases the consequences may be acceptable because there are no strong arguments against the decisions, or

because the consequences have only limited impact on students. But in other cases, the consequences are profound and the use of test results should be carefully examined and understood, if not challenged. What school officials consider an appropriate and necessary test use may be seen by parents and advocates as unfair or harmful. The burden of presenting strong and educationally justifiable reasons for use of test results lies with school officials; the burden is on parents and advocates to convince educators and political leaders empowered to mandate tests, and to make decisions based on test results, that changes should be made in how test results are sometimes used.

SAMPLE LETTER

September 1, 1980

Ms. Betty Smith, Principal
Franklin Middle School
129 Average Street
Midtown, Alabama

Dear Ms. Smith:

Each school year I am aware that my children are required to take a number of tests in school. Some of these are standardized tests. I assume these tests are for an educational purpose which benefits my children, and I would like to be better informed about such tests.

It would be very helpful to me if you would provide me with the information about these tests requested on the attached sheets. There is one sheet for each of my children: Jane Jones, grade 7, and Bill Jones, grade 8. Enclosed is a stamped, self-addressed envelope which you can use to return the information to me.

If during the school year my children are expected to take a standardized test other than the ones you now anticipate, please inform me. Thank you for your courtesy and cooperation.

Sincerely,

Fred Jones

Fred Jones

DATE SENT: 9/1/80

NAME OF CHILD: JANE JONES

DATE RETURNED:

GRADE: 7

CORRECT NAME OF TEST	PURPOSE OF TEST	APPROXIMATE MONTH WHEN TEST WILL BE GIVEN	APPROXIMATE MONTH WHEN TEST RESULTS WILL BE AVAILABLE FOR REVIEW AND DISCUSSION	PERSON WITH WHOM TEST RESULTS SHOULD BE DISCUSSED	HOW WILL THE TEST RESULTS BE USED TO BENEFIT THE EDUCATION OF JANE JONES

[1] Parents/advocates who are acting on behalf of children with handicapping conditions, or children who are being evaluated for possible classification as handicapped, need to be familiar with Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. This law, and the regulations based on it, mandates school officials to follow certain procedures regarding the evaluation and placement of children.

RESOURCES

"How to Make Sense Out of Test Scores," How to Evaluate Education Programs, Vol. 3, No. 6, June, 1979. 7 pp. Order from: Capitol Publications, Suite G-12, 2430 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20037.

Parents Can Understand Testing, 88 pp., 1980. $2.50. Order from: National Committee for Citizens in Education, Suite 410 Wilde Lake Village Green, Columbia, Maryland 21044.

"A Parent's Guide to Standardized Aptitude and Achievement Testing," 12 pp. 1978. 50¢. Order from National School Public Relations Association, Department G-4, 1801 North Moore Street, Arlington, Virginia 22209.

"Reading Tests: Do They Help or Hurt Your Child?," 18 pp. 1978. 50¢. Order from the North Dakota Study Group on Evaluation, Center for Teaching and Learning, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, North Dakota 58202.

"Reading Tests: What Does That Score Mean?," 16 pp. 1978. 50¢. Order from the North Dakota Study Group on Evaluation (same address as above).

"The Testing Maze: An Evaluation of Standardized Testing in America," 20 pp. 1979. $2.00. Order from the National PTA, 700 North Rush Street, Chicago, Illinois 60611.

"Your Child and Testing," National Institute of Education, 36 pp. 1980. Free. Order from Consumer Information Center, Pueblo, CO 81002.

"94-142 and 504: Numbers that Add Up to Educational Rights for Handicapped Children - A Guide for Parents and Advocates," 47 pp. 1978. $2.00. Order from the Children's Defense Fund, 1520 New Hampshire Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20036.